



Education

Written word builds bridges between school and home

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When parents ask their children what they did at school that day, the canonical response is, of course: “Nothing.” Hmmmm. Parents’ involvement with their kid’s education can’t stay strong surviving on a thin gruel of newsletters and PTO meetings.

Many years ago, when her daughter first started school, Julie Wollman began getting short letters “describing,” such as a first-grader can, something that happened at school that day. Mom wrote back. Over time, mother and daughter developed a written conversation that also sparked other talks about the specifics of life at school.

As it happens, Wollman is an expert in literacy, with a particular passion for exploring ways to engage children in the powers of reading and writing. (She’s now a vice president at Wheelock College.) The correspondence about her daughter’s school day seemed so promising, Wollman studied and perfected the technique. In 2000, she published “Family Message Journals — Teaching Writing through Family Involvement” under her then-married name Julie Wollman-Bonilla.

Wollman says, “Lots of parents can’t be at the school itself, so this is a way of bringing school to them.”

And according to her, decades of research have shown that “children need real purposes and audiences if their writing abilities are to develop fully, and if they are to engage with writing as a worthwhile, motivating, lifelong activity.” These letters give kids a real reason to reflect on what they learned, and then express their thoughts to a real person. “They want the parent to understand what they did, so they keep learning to write better.” The letters harness kids’ natural motivation.

Pawtucket’s International Charter School (ICS) has adopted this technique. All students, kindergarten through grade 5, write letters home twice a week in notebooks large enough to hold the whole correspondence between child and adult. Teachers assign the letters’ topic, which might be about a science experiment, today’s math concept, or a book they’re reading. As long as they’re on topic, kids can say whatever they want.

The examples below are as written, including misspellings and grammatical errors.

Juliana, a fourth-grader and English-language learner, wrote to her father:

“Dear Dad

In english class, Ms. Kim is reading us a book entitled Shara Special by Esmá Raji Codell. So far, Shara the main character is 11 years old. She went to a special class for no reason. Shara’s special teacher’s name is Ms. Peaches. Shara’s mom went one day to her school and she said to the precibal and Ms. Peaches. Shara is normal first because she doesn’t like to show her work doesn’t mean she is not normal. Shara is not staying in this special class. Make her stay back again but I don’t want her in this class. So Shara is in school she’s in fifth grade her teacher’s name is Ms. Pontie. She is funny.

With love, Juliana

P.S. Have you stade back?”

This is excellent practice for her, and she does make herself clear, even if she still has a lot to learn.

Parents may write back in whatever language they find comfortable. Juliana’s dad chose to respond with the English he too is learning:

“My Dear Juliana. I was never held back in my student’s time. I was a good student and I did all my homeworks and ather assigments. I respected my teachers and classmates too. I’m very proud of you, because you are following my rules and so you’ll never have any problem in your life. Thanks for be so nice and special. Your daddy. Julian”

When a parent or guardian can’t correspond, for whatever reason, the school conscripts a grown sibling, a relative or neighbor, rarely a teacher. The school’s director has filled the role. But in any case, a caring someone engages with the child’s life in the classroom. Kids want to communicate with adults, despite gestures to the contrary. Parents want a little window into the child’s day, and all parents need the opportunity or gently asserted obligation to respond and get involved.

English-dominant Timmy, in the same class as Juliana, wrote this for the same assignment:

“Dear Dad,

In English class, Ms. Kim is reading a book entitled Sahara Special by Esme Raji Codell. ... My thoughts about the book is that it’s so good you should get it for me that’s how good it is. And I also recommend it to you if you ever get it for me. You better buy it or else. Love your son, Timmy”

Beyond bits of funky grammar and spelling, Timmy, something of a jokester, is expressing himself well. To my mind his letter underscores the brilliance of using the bond with the parent to drive home the point that clear, expressive writing can work for kids, in many ways.

Teachers read the journals, but do not correct them. The correspondence gives teachers a wealth of information about their students. Hmmm, we need to work on verb agreement. Yikes, Mr. So-and-so is coming down too hard on his son’s struggles. Ooo, they loved that project; how can I do another like it? Rich stuff.

Wollman says, “That book is old (published in 2000), but I still get lots of comments from people across the country. ‘I use it.’ ‘I love it.’ ‘It works!’ ”

No surprise. It’s a win-win-win for teachers, parents and kids.

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